DAWN

OPINION

Narrow escape

SECURITY agencies have prevented what could have been one of the most devastating terror attacks Karachi has faced in years. Acting on intelligence gathered over several weeks, counter-terrorism officials intercepted a truck loaded with 2,000 kg of explosive material, along with detonators, cylinders and other components. Three suspects are now in custody. Had the device reached its destination, the consequences could have been catastrophic. The details show that this was not a hasty or improvised plot. The suspects had rented a property on the outskirts of the city, kept their activities hidden, and transported explosive material over nearly 1,000 km. According to investigators, the explosives were sourced from across the Afghan border, moved into Balochistan and then brought onwards to Karachi. The alleged involvement of the banned BLA shows how determined terrorist outfits remain and how they see urban centres as high-impact targets.

Karachi was clearly chosen for its symbolic and practical value. As Pakistan's economic and commercial centre, an attack here would have caused fear far beyond the blast site. It would have disrupted business activity, shaken investor confidence and deepened public anxiety at a time when the country can least afford further instability. Preventing the attack before the explosives could be deployed underlines the importance of intelligence-led operations that focus on stopping violence before it occurs. The case also reinforces the importance of coordination between security and intelligence bodies. According to the DG ISPR, the Karachi plot came to light because multiple agencies shared and combined information. This kind of cooperation is essential when terrorist networks operate quietly across regions and use long supply routes that are difficult to trace.

The claim that explosive material was transported from across the Afghan border adds to long-standing concerns about terrorists exploiting external space to plan and supply attacks. While such assertions must always be examined carefully, this case shows why Pakistan should continue raising the issue diplomatically, while strengthening its own defences. At the same time, the incident exposes weaknesses. The alleged use of fertilisers and chemicals, and the ease of renting property without triggering suspicion, point to gaps in enforcement. Better control of explosive materials, stricter checks on rental housing, and closer monitoring of supply chains are basic but necessary steps. Preventing future plots will depend on staying alert, showing political resolve and enforcing the rules consistently, rather than celebrating isolated successes and moving on. One truck has been stopped, and countless lives saved. The harder task now is to dismantle the networks, routes and enablers that made such a plot possible in the first place.

Opposition leader?

THE continuing delay in appointing leaders of the opposition in the National Assembly and by extension, the Senate, raises questions about the government's commitment to the spirit of parliamentary democracy. Whatever procedural explanations are offered, the fact remains that Pakistan's legislature has been without a formally recognised opposition leader for months, an anomaly that no functioning democracy should tolerate. The latest assurance by National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq that the process will now be initiated "afresh" hardly inspires confidence. Rules governing the appointment of an opposition leader are clear. The opposition has long conveyed its choice of PkMAP's Mahmood Achakzai, and the legal obstacles cited earlier, particularly the issue of former opposition leader Omar Ayub's disqualification, appear to have been resolved. Yet the Speaker's office continues to fall back on verification exercises and procedural resets, even while offering its 'good offices'. The focus here is on the National Assembly, where the delay has been most glaring. Mr Sadiq's insistence that he is merely a facilitator would carry more weight if the facilitation translated into action. A parliament without an opposition leader is, arguably, structurally compromised. Leaving the post vacant sidelines dissent.

The saga exposes a familiar contradiction in our democracy. Political actors are quick to invoke the supremacy of parliament when challenged, yet less inclined to uphold this principle when it is inconvenient. In a robust democracy, all manner of pressure — political, institutional or arising from external circles — must be resisted. Otherwise, appeals to democracy ring hollow, and reverence for parliament becomes self-serving. The responsibility lies squarely with the government and the custodians of the House. It is not their role to judge the acceptability of the opposition's nominee, only to ensure that the expressed will of the opposition is respected in accordance with the law. Any other approach amounts to influence over opposition representation, which weakens parliamentary legitimacy. The political system is already strained by polarisation. Prolonging avoidable disputes over a settled constitutional matter only deepens that crisis. If parliament is to reclaim credibility and authority, it must first put its own house in order. Promptly appointing opposition leaders in both Houses would be a small but essential step in that direction.

Cleaner energy

PAKISTAN'S decision to seek UNESCAP's policy advisory and technical support for developing an energy transition investment plan reflects a growing recognition that the country's shift to renewable energy is critical for ensuring affordable power for economic progress, fiscal and external sector stability and climate resilience. A credible investment framework can help us attract foreign green investment, leverage blended finance models that combine public and philanthropic funds, and access concessional loans and guarantees to make RE projects financially viable, especially for the underserved.

Decades of dependence on imported fossil fuels is a key factor behind the repeated exposure of the economy to external shocks, balance-of-payments crises and a power sector debt burden that continues to grow. Against this backdrop, the case for transition is compelling. Pakistan is blessed with abundant solar and wind resources, and the cost of renewable generation has fallen sharply. Though the country should have already been well on its way to a cleaner and cheaper energy mix, progress has been slow due to policy inconsistencies, tariff distortions, financial constraints and the lack of capacity to tap concessional international green capital. While an effective ETIP can offer investors and development partners a comprehensive roadmap linking generation targets, grid upgrades, financing instruments and regulatory reforms, financing innovations will not mean much unless accompanied by structural domestic policy and governance reforms. Briefly, the availability of green finance alone cannot guarantee the energy transition's success, which depends largely on how the state implements the tough power sector reforms and restores policy credibility. Energy transition is fundamental to economic resilience, climate adaptation and fiscal and external stability. UNESCAP's involvement is welcome, but unless financing is tightly integrated with governance reform, grid investment and fiscal discipline, the promise of a cleaner, affordable energy future will remain elusive.

BY ZAHID HUSSAIN

Trumpian imperialism

The US president has pushed the world into extremely dangerous territory.

THE image of a blindfolded and handcuffed Nicol s Maduro being taken to a prison in New York presented the ugly face of Trumpian imperialism. It is not the first time that the US, in pursuit of regime change, has invaded a sovereign state, but the abduction of the Venezuelan president and his wife is the most brazen instance of imperialistic aggression in recent history.

The military action against Venezuela has exposed President Donald Trump, who has, ironically, attempted to present himself as a 'man of peace' in his quest for the Nobel Peace Prize. It is a violation of international law and demonstrates the unravelling of an already collapsing global order or whatever is left of it.

Trump has made it clear that America will continue to control the oil-rich country and its resources. "We are going to have a presence in Venezuela as it pertains to oil," Trump said, asserting America's 'right' to the country's oil.

After Maduro's removal by force, the American president called a meeting of top American companies to discuss the takeover of Venezuela's oil fields. It is apparent that America's blatant action in Venezuela had nothing to do with sending drugs and criminals to America, as Trump claimed, but rather to capture oil and rich resources.

The American military action is hardly a surprise. Trump had increased pressure on Venezuela for the past several months. American air force jets had been bombing alleged drug boats, and killed over 100 people, without providing much evidence to substantiate their claims, in a blatant violation of international law. American forces also intercepted tankers carrying oil from Venezuela. The Trump administration has declared that Maduro was overseeing a "narco-terrorist" organisation. The January invasion was very well planned.

Maduro has also been accused by the Trump administration of "Conspiracy to Possess Machineguns and Destructive Devices against the United States". These charges do not justify the invasion and abduction of a head of state. They are just a cover-up for America's unlawful military action.

Many analysts believe that even Trump is not serious about the drug charge. For instance, media reports have pointed out that other individuals similarly charged with drug trafficking have received a pardon — among them a Honduran former president extradited to the US.

America has frequently attempted regime change in South American countries to protect its oil and other companies and prevent the governments of these states from adopting an independent foreign policy trajectory. In fact, American administrations had tried to remove the left-leaning nationalist administrations of Hugo Ch vez and his successor Nicol s Maduro for years, but they failed.

The US first imposed sanctions against Venezuela during the era of Hugo Ch vez. Following the Venezuelan president's death in 2013, the administration of Barack Obama declared Venezuela a "national security threat" and imposed sanctions on certain Venezuelan officials for corruption and rights violations. President Trump's first administration also imposed sanctions, blocking Venezuela's oil exports. Sanctions and other factors have crippled the country's economy and the growing unrest there has seen America capitalising on the situation to attempt regime change. President Joe Biden, for instance, had earlier called an opposition leader the "true winner" of a disputed presidential poll.

The latest development in the Venezuela-US timeline is the use of brute force by the Trump administration, which clearly believes that the US is not subject to any international law and has extraordinary powers to raid a country in the dead of night and kidnap its leader, without facing any censure, let alone consequences. Shortly after the operation, Trump stated at a press conference, "We are reasserting American power."

What is truly disgusting is the criminal silence and in some cases, the tacit support by some countries for America's military intervention in Venezuela. The European countries, while calling for international law and the UN Charter to be upheld, has also said that Maduro lacked "the legitimacy of a democratically elected president".

Trump has threatened Colombia and Cuba with similar action. "America can project our will anywhere, any time," declared defence chief Pete Hegseth with the imperialistic arrogance that has become the hallmark of the Trump administration. The maverick American president appears emboldened by his military success. Soon after raiding Venezuela, Trump, when asked whether the US would conduct an operation against Colombia, said that it "sounds good to me". He also declared that Cuba was not worth invading because "it's ready to fall".

Trump believes the US has the right to intervene in any country in the Western Hemisphere and has referred to the 1923 Monroe Doctrine, according to which the Americas were off limits to the European powers, as the 'Donroe doctrine' in a reference to himself. What he forgets is that the world has changed and such brazen use of force will have serious consequences for America and world peace.

Trump's imperialistic ambitions go even further. He has once again claimed that Greenland needed to be under American control. He has appointed a special US envoy for Greenland, ignoring the Danish government's protest. In the past, he has threatened to annex Canada as the 51st state of America. Besides, he has once again threatened to militarily intervene in Iran to 'protect' anti-government protesters. Last year, the US had joined Israel in bombing Iran's nuclear facilities.

Washington has encouraged Israel's continued aggression in Gaza in violation of the ceasefire. Unfortunately, Pakistan and the Arab countries have closed their eyes to Trump's imperialist designs. Pakistan must review its commitment to joining the international peace force in Gaza led by Trump. It's a trap to crush the Palestinian resistance.

Trump has pushed the world into extremely dangerous territory. He appears to have forgotten the lessons of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. America will regret its latest imperialist aggression. ■

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BY AROOJ WAHEED DAR

OOSAY who?

DESPITE their scale, out-of-school adolescents and youth (OOSAY) are the most overlooked demographic, remaining largely invisible in policy discourse and programmatic prioritisation. Census 2023 data shows that a whopping 63 per cent of Pakistan's youth population and 23pc of adolescent population have never received any formal education. Gender disparities are stark, with nearly three-quarters of women aged 15-29 having never enrolled in school, compared to about one-half of men.

These figures reflect more than just statistical gaps; they capture the lived realities of a majority of young people who experience early and sustained exclusion from proper education, leading to marginalisation on multiple fronts, including alternative learning opportunities, decent employment, health access and civic engagement.

Their concentration in the informal economy limits the availability of timely and reliable data, constraining evidence-based, targeted responses to support their reintegration. Moreover, policy frameworks routinely collapse OOSAY into broader youth categories, assuming exposure to formal schooling that many never had. This effectively renders them excluded from the very support intended for them.

SDPI, in collaboration with UNFPA conducted a mixed-methods 'needs assessment' of OOSAY across KP and Punjab. The aim was to understand the kind of support OOSAY themselves say they need to support their reintegration across four key domains: education, employment, health, and engagement.

Results from the study show that across both provinces, financial barriers are the most binding in hindering school access, impacting nearly three out of four respondents. These are compounded by responsibilities at home or work, gender norms, unavailability of schools, long commutes, lack of transportation, risk of harassment, and early marriage, all of them particularly restrictive for girls.

The impacts of being out-of-school are largely gendered, with boys often forced into early, low-skill, physically strenuous labour. In the sample, nearly two-thirds of male OOSAY said they felt pressured to economically support themselves and their families, leading to child labour. On the other hand, girls are expected to shoulder the burden of household responsibilities and unpaid care work. Findings show that 85.4pc of female OOSAY spend their day performing domestic chores and unpaid caregiving activities, limiting their availability for schooling, skills training, or paid work. Many girls are also forced into early marriage. In our sample, the median age of marriage for female OOSAY was 18 years, indicating that nearly half had been married at or below the minimum legal age of marriage.

The consequences of exclusion from education spill into the labour market, with nearly three-quarters of OOSAY lacking access to paid work, including an overwhelming 95pc of female respondents. Job opportunities are extremely limited, informal, and unstable, with nearly half of working respondents earning less than Rs25,000 per month despite working 12-15-hour-long shifts. This is even below the minimum wage rate.

> Out-of-school adolescents and youth should be recognised as a distinct demographic.

Forty-two per cent of working OOSAY rely on daily wages with no job security, stability, or benefits. Workplaces lack safety, supervision, or opportunities to sustainably teach technical skills that these young people can harness in the long run.

These vulnerabilities are magnified due to a lack of access to alternative learning opportunities. In the sample, more than 90pc of the respondents reported that they have never enrolled in any skills development or vocational training programme. Only about 12.6pc (mostly males) pursued informal apprenticeships, and around 15pc (mostly females) relied on home-based learning.

Health outcomes further reflect this structural neglect. Many OOSAY suffer from malnutrition, chronic body pains, and mental health issues, but are unable to access healthcare due to unaffordability, mobility barriers, and low awareness. Nearly three-fourths rely on public hospitals because of cost considerations, with many often resorting to self-medication and home-based remedies. Two out of five respondents show signs of mental distress, but only 7.2pc recognise a need for counselling due to stigma. Mental health services are extremely scarce, with only 6.1pc reporting availability in their chosen health facility. Moreover, 82.5pc of married OOSAY have never accessed sexual and reproductive health services due to stigma or unavailability of services.

It is also important to note that being out-of-school is an intergenerational phenomenon: young people without education often end up in low-paid jobs and cannot afford schooling for their own children, perpetuating a cycle of illiteracy, unstable employment, and poverty. Hence, government attention is needed to address the issue. While several existing policies target out-of-school children, their focus remains largely on re-enrolment within the school-going age bracket, overlooking the fact that many have already aged out of the system and require alternative forms of support.

Going forward, there is a need for policymakers to recognise OOSAY as a distinct demographic that requires targeted support beyond re-enrolment efforts. This requires a coordinated national and provincial strategy with clear mandates, dedicated budgets, and integrated data systems, alongside stronger enforcement of labour laws, reforms in child labour laws, and targeted poverty reduction measures.

These policy interventions must be complemented by programmatic support in the form of inclusive education planning, flexible and phased bridging and skills development pathways aligned with market demand, formalised apprenticeships, and employment or entrepreneurial support channelled through district-level youth centres. There is also a need to adopt gender-responsive models that prioritise girls' access through safe spaces, mobility support, and community engagement. Failure to act will continue to lock millions into cycles of low productivity, poor health, and economic precarity, putting the country's demographic dividend at risk. ■

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